

Example of eating disorders related with gymnastics research paper

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The problem of eating disorders is becoming more and more urgent in today's society. Generally they can be characterized as abnormal eating habits which may be manifested either in insufficient or excessive eating. The definition provided in the book by Tania Heller (2003) states that “Eating disorders are serious, potentially life-threatening illnesses that involve disturbances in eating habits and excessive concerns about body weight and shape”. (p. 7) What is most important about eating disorders is that they are caused by a set of different psychological, cultural and biological factors which makes the issue more complicated to solve than if the eating disorders were simple behavioral problems.

Unfortunately, eating disorders among athletes, particularly among gymnasts are becoming more and more frequent. Strict demands towards the body weight and figure lead to stresses, which consequentially lead to eating disorders. Generally eating disorders can be classified into two main types: those related with the insufficient food intake and those related with the excessive food intake. The most well-known disorder of the first group is Anorexia nervosa which is manifested in the obsessive fear of gaining weight and results in the refusal to maintain healthy body weight. A bright representative of the second group is binge eating disorder which is manifested in binge eating. Such disorders as bulimia nervosa may combine the symptoms of the two groups. In the case of bulimia for example recurrent binge eating is interchanged with compensatory behaviors which include purging that is also a characteristic feature of anorexia. Still, other variants of compensatory behavior in bulimia also include excessive exercise. There is also a group of eating disorders called “Eating disorders

not otherwise specified” which includes various combinations of symptoms that are characteristic for both anorexia and binge eating disorder.

As it was stated previously, eating disorders are caused by a combination of psychological, cultural and biological factors. Therefore they may develop as a consequence of the unhealthy habits of a person which he or she acquired under the influence of cultural beliefs and values and which could not help having influenced this person’s health. As an example of how culture may affect eating one may take gymnastics. This type of sport puts forward strict demands when it comes to the figure and weight of an athlete. Gymnasts always have to be in shape and cannot allow themselves eat what they want. In fact, in some cases they can even become so obsessed with counting calories and trying to calculate how much and when they can eat in order to keep a certain weight, that this obsession itself is thought by some specialists to be an eating disorder. Naturally, the extreme cases of such watching waistline lead to nothing good. By the present time several cases of deaths from eating disorders among gymnasts have been reported in the media. Joaquin Dosil mentions one of such cases in her book “ Eating disorders in Athletics” (2008): “ Tragically, some extreme cases can emerge, such as the death of the gymnast Christy Henrich in 1994 from anorexia, aged just 22 years and weighting a meager 29 kilos.”(p. 104) What is more, the case of Christy Henrich was not the only one. As the book “ Sociology of deviant behavior”(2008) reports: “ Many other well-known female athletes, have publicly acknowledged their eating disorders, including Olympic gymnasts Cathy Rigby, Nadia Comaneci and Kathy Johnson”(p. 484). The main reason of this phenomenon lies in the fact that the female gymnasts

are put under the constant psychological pressure due to the need to maintain a certain body weight.

They have to think of diets and exercises if they want to reach success in the profession of their choice. Such a situation can be very traumatic for nerves, as many gymnasts, especially those whose figures are naturally not predisposed to thinness. It is a common belief and recommendation that those gymnasts who can make successful professionals in their field have to be asthenics, which means that they are to have quick metabolism and light and thin bones. For such people remaining thin is usually easier than for the representatives of two other types of body habiti known by medicine – sthenics and hypersthenics. However, the gymnastic may require diet even from asthenics, which is especially dangerous as due to quick metabolism they do not have much of excessive weight that they can lose, therefore they have to maintain an unhealthy body weight. In the case of gymnastics eating disorders are predetermined by biological and psychological factors. The biological ones include the beforementioned incapability of a human's organism to perform its normal functions under the conditions of constant diets and starving. To the psychological ones belong stresses and pressure that are especially indicative for perfectionists who place high demands on themselves. This type of people is really common among athletes, which makes it clearer why statistics shows quite a number of cases of eating disorders from which they suffered.

Not only athletes are subjected to anorexia and bulimia. Cultural and psychological factors are what can trigger the development of an eating

disorder by any person and with current cultural values the issue is far from being solved. Facts show that the number of cases of eating disorders increases with the passing years. As the book “ Abnormal Psychology: an Integrative Approach” reports: “ A growing number of studies in different countries indicate that eating disorders are widespread and increased dramatically in Western countries from about 1960 to 1995”. (p. 261)

Fashion and media are the elements of today’s culture that contribute most to the emergences of eating disorders. The age group in which eating disorders are particularly prone to appear includes teenagers and people in their young twenties. The reason for that lies in the fact that in this social layer of people such factors, as low self-esteem and certain disposition towards following the trends that are dictated by the media, are especially likely to appear. Models that appear on TV and on the covers of magazines are always thin and some of them even seem to be unhealthily thin. Teenage girls who normally have poor life experience and are too young to have their own opinions of what is beautiful desperately want to be as thin as the models they see in adverts. They start to try diets in the age when the organism is still growing and developing which results in the various health problems.

Psychological factors are probably the most important problem in the issue of eating disorders. Of course they develop under the influence of culture and finally result into biological factors that ruin humans’ health. Still, without them eating disorders would not occur. If a person has self-assurance, firm convictions and healthy self-esteem, he or she will not get under the influence of media that promotes excessive thinness. As “ The

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Oxford Handbook of Eating Disorders”(2010) cites: “ The most potent and best replicated risk factors for both BN and – to a lesser degree also AN – are gender, weight and shape concerns, and a cluster of variables around negative affect, neuroticism, and general psychiatric morbidity.” (p. 134) Neuroses, depressions and psychological traumas are the leading reasons for eating disorders. Therefore the preventative measures for eating disorders may include the prevention of stresses and depressions. In cases of severe depressions one should better turn for help to a good psychologist than try to return a good mood back by constant eating. The same is true for gymnasts. Being ambitious may be good, but giving up one’s life in the process of achieving one’s goal seems highly illogical. Luckily, the promotion of special literature that highlights the dangers of the eating disorders which can be observed nowadays definitely may make more people to start searching for help at the early stages of bulimia and anorexia and in some cases even save their lives. Moreover, articles regarding eating disorders start to appear more frequently in magazines and newspapers and the broadcasts dedicated to this issue may often be seen on TV.

The fact that should be promoted rather than slim figures is that one’s health is in one’s hands and without health nothing can bring happiness. Some gymnasts choose to ruin their health in an effort to achieve success and public recognition by showing the highest results and being the best in their field. But when one acts against nature, success is unlikely to come. Dying of an eating disorder seems to be a grim ending – but it is realistic. Some people should stop and think if what they want to achieve is worth sacrificing their health.

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